

**Coping With the COVID-19 Pandemic Using Media: Extending the Coping-Fit-Hypothesis to Media Use.**

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**Author Note**

Data and material are openly available at the project's Open Science Framework page (<https://osf.io/t8xqd/>).

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The COVID-19 pandemic created an uncertain and stressful situation, in which people not only worry about their health or their economic situation, but in which their opportunities to cope with this stress have also been limited by the introduced restrictions. This increased the importance of media as coping tools, providing information, orientation, but also distraction and social contact (Brooks et al., 2020). So far, research has not agreed on whether the use of media for coping is functional or dysfunctional (e.g., Kuss et al., 2016; van Ingen et al., 2016), however, such one-sided classifications have recently been criticized while calling for research that focuses on the situational, individual and media-specific boundary conditions of successful media use for coping (Wolfers & Schneider, 2020).

We answer this call by combining the coping-fit-hypothesis (Conway & Terry, 1992) with mood management theory (MMT, Zillmann, 1988). The coping-fit-hypothesis assumes that problem-focused coping is most effective in controllable situations while emotion-focused coping fits best to situations with low individual control (Park et al., 2004). We assumed the pandemic situation to be of low individual control, hence, emotion-focused coping should be effective in reducing stress (H1) while problem-focused coping should be ineffective (H3).

MMT proposes that using media content that is unrelated to the stressor (low semantic affinity) and positive (positive valence) is successful in regulating bad moods and emotions (Zillmann, 1988). As MMT concerns regulating emotions, its assumptions are especially suited to predict the effectiveness of emotion-focused coping (Stevens & Dillmann Carpentier, 2017). Therefore, we assumed that using emotion-focused coping is even more successfully reducing stress for individuals who chose media content that is positive and unrelated to the pandemic (H2). We additionally explore moderation effects for problem-focused coping (RQ1).

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When faced with a global pandemic, however, coping effectiveness should go beyond reducing stress: Successful adaption to the situation should additionally include increased knowledge and preventive behaviors. We assumed that problem-focused coping increased both knowledge and preventive behaviors (H4). For emotion-focused coping this relationship could go either way as emotion-focused coping could help to regulate stress in order to be able to face a problem but could also distract from approaching a problem (Hastall, 2017). We, therefore, exploratory investigated the effects of emotion-focused coping on knowledge and preventive behavior (RQ2). As MMT focuses on hedonic media choices, we only exploratory assessed the moderation effects of media characteristics with emotion-focused or problem-focused coping on knowledge and preventive behavior (RQ3).

We conducted a one-week longitudinal questionnaire study in April 2020 in Germany with 348 participants. Coping strategies were assessed with a modified version of the Brief COPE (Carver, 1997), distraction was selected as an emotion-focused coping strategy while active coping and information seeking were selected as problem-focused strategies. When participants indicated having used a certain coping strategy, they were asked which media they used to employ the respective strategy. The characteristics of these media were assessed on a semantic differential. Additionally, we measured stress, perceived coping efficacy, perceived and objective knowledge and preventive behavior on self-developed scales.

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